



Drama in bloom

Stratford Festival's gardens an unexpected treat worthy of applause

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID HOBSON

What Ontario tourist attraction receives 1,500 visitors twice a day? Would you believe the place is a garden – and that it's right on our doorstep?

That's quite a number and you may be wondering why you can't guess the location. The secret is that many of those visitors may not be aware they're visiting one of the finest public gardens in southern Ontario.

Located at 99 Downie St. in Stratford, this also happens to be the address of the Stratford Festival Theatre, and the primary intention for most visitors is to attend a per-



Stratford Festival's head gardener Anita Jacobsen can't hide behind Shakespeare when her horticultural efforts are on full display.

formance at the theatre. Still, I'm guessing there have been more than a few plant lovers who've happened by and wondered about the purpose of the impressive building beside the gardens, but then, that's a plant lover for you.

For many theatregoers, the gardens are a serendipitous discovery. In the words of head gardener Anita Jacobsen, "It sets it apart from other theatres. Many tell us they value the gardens as much as the theatre."

There are four distinct sections, each one a delight. The largest is the Arthur Meighen Gardens, created in 1996 as a gift from the family of Canada's ninth prime minister, first elected in 1920. It lines the approach to the front entrance of the theatre.

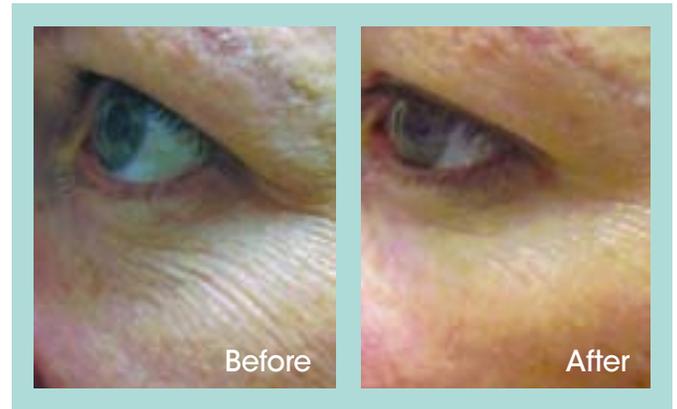
I began my exploration at the foot of the garden, at a magnificent, 90-year-old ginkgo tree beneath which is an understory of native plants abuzz with pollinators. From there I meandered along the many

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criss-crossing paths up the gentle slope to the theatre.

It took a while as there are so many exceptional plants, all in top condition, well established with room to reach their full potential. There are yellow hollyhocks, striking red crocosmia and fragrant phlox in pastel shades. Ornamental grasses bring balance to the rich array of colours.

The Meighen gardens are a botanist's delight. The plants – mainly perennials – are all clearly labelled with their botanical names followed by their common names. This is essential when visitors are inclined to ask the eternal question, "Quid est nomen illius planta?" (What's the name of that plant?) Horticulture students from Fanshawe College visit each September to practise their plant recognition skills, and there are enough species to keep them busy.

Ask Jacobsen, and she always has the answer. She began what would become her career while still a toddler, helping her father in his landscaping business based in London, Ont. She never strayed far from the plant world and, with a degree in zoology, she added an essential understanding of the four-or-more-legged pests that inevitably appear in a garden. Even two-legged pests have been known to appear, snipping a cutting or two.

Caring for a public garden requires an understanding of both weather and climate change. Being more conscious of maintaining a water-wise garden, Jacobsen now avoids the use of overly thirsty plants. She monitors them closely, only watering when necessary. "I also try to include plants that don't need so much nursing along," she says. That includes the need for pest control. For example, she plants fewer Asiatic lilies now because of the voracious red lily beetle that devastates the plants.

With a depth of almost 60 centimetres (two feet) of healthy soil in the Meighen gardens, there's little need for fertilizer, and judging from the health of the plants, they do fine without it.

The main goal of Jacobsen's team — two assistants and three summer helpers from May to August — is to ensure the gardens

always look beautiful, all the time. Snipping spent blooms, known as deadheading, is a continual process. Tricks like the “Chelsea chop” are used to encourage plants like garden phlox to produce more blooms. The chop is named for the British custom of lightly shearing receptive plants in early June, after the conclusion of the famous Chelsea Flower Show.

Whereas a display at such a garden show is created to last only a few days using impractical plant combinations, it’s a much greater challenge to ensure a permanent garden always looks its best, especially as few perennials bloom all season. The Meighen gardens are a fine example of clever succession planting, where plants are selected to bloom on time, in sequence, before leaving the stage.

For Jacobsen, this is like seeing a new performance weekly. “I tell people who remark, come back next week as there’ll always be something different.”

Does she have a favourite plant? “Yes,” she tells me, “I always have favourites, but they’re different favourites every month, although I really like the perennial hibiscus and I love the Japanese anemones. They’re so fresh at the end of summer.”

After an hour in the garden, I had a list of new favourites.

The Meighen gardens are a place to enjoy, to learn, to see the potential of plants that can easily be grown successfully in one’s own garden.

Venture a short way along the building forecourt, past the huge planters, each containing Lantanas, a popular garden annual impressively trained into small trees, and you’ll find the Ann Casson rose garden. To pass by on a balmy, midsummer evening is to be enchanted by the fragrance.

There is a perception that roses can be difficult to grow successfully as older varieties are often more susceptible to disease. You wouldn’t think so of the ones in Jacobsen’s rose garden. She moved the original plot out of the shade of ever larger trees and into a more favourable place in full sun where the roses excel. With her



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team's daily attention, they perform to perfection.

The rose bed is filled with about 40 varieties in a rainbow of colours. Included are familiar hybrid tea and floribundas, newer David Austins, and Canadian-bred Explorer Roses.

"People do have a fond spot for roses," Jacobsen says. "They like to see a hybrid tea in different colours because everyone has their favourites. Some of mine are Double Delight, Pretty Lady, Munstead Wood and De Montarville."

Only steps away is the Elizabethan Garden. Here, perhaps during intermission, a theatregoer can slip right into a floral representation of the age of Shakespeare and ponder, as he may have, at the sight of many of the flowers that would have been familiar to him.

This is an immaculately maintained, parterre garden, a style first introduced in France during the life of Shakespeare. Elegantly designed with crazy paving, a method that originated in ancient Rome, the sections of parterre are enclosed by neatly trimmed boxwood hedges. At one corner stands a gleaming steel statue of the bard, book in hand. On the fountain at the centre, words from his play "Cymbeline" are inscribed: "These flow'rs are like the pleasures of the world."

Within the symmetrical parterre are four named gardens containing plants familiar in the 16th century. There's the Witch's Garden with plants such as Vervain, considered in ancient times to be a herb with great medicinal powers. In the romantic garden are flowers used to make garlands, nosegays and posies. These might include clary sage, used for love potions, dreams and divinations; and, of course, in the "kitchen garden" are edible plants and herbs. It's best described as an Elizabethan drugstore.

The fourth section of the parterre is Shakespeare's garden, where plants are paired with passages mentioned in Shakespeare's works.

"The challenge was to find plants from 500 years ago that would display well alongside modern day species," Jacobsen

says. She found them: cowslip, peony, yellow flag, wild thyme, hyssop and eryngium. Both the old names and the botanical names are used to identify them. There's even *Agrostemma githago*, known before botanists renamed it as corncockle, a common weed of wheat fields. Thanks to modern farming methods, it's almost extinct in the land of Shakespeare. In this garden, it's allowed to produce a mass of magenta flowers.

Given the hundreds of references to plants mentioned by Shakespeare in his plays and sonnets, had he failed as a playwright he might have been a gardener. Given the mystery surrounding his identity, maybe he was.

Beyond the Elizabethan Garden, in an expanse of lawn, is a carpet bed, a style that was all the rage in the Victorian era and is still popular in public gardens. A carpet bed is designed using low-growing plants to present a smooth surface patterned as the name suggests. This one provides a contemporary connection with the theatre that particularly attracts the interest of theatregoers who may have only a passing interest in plants and gardens.

Jacobsen says many carpet beds were established in the early days of the theatre by Dennis Washburn of England. "All were taken out after renovation, but the public missed them and demanded they be put back in."

A round bed five metres in diameter was added at the time by Harry Jongerden, the head gardener who preceded Jacobsen. Jongerden is now executive director at the Toronto Botanical Garden. "Harry had the idea to take pictures or images associated with the plays and illustrate them in the garden."

Jacobsen continues the tradition but, for easier access for maintenance, she switched to a long, narrow bed, two metres wide and 15 metres long. The carpet bed is planted in sections, separated by taller plants. In each of the sections, plants form a symbol representing six of the plays being performed during the season. The fun is in trying to

guess which of six plays are represented.

Among them for the 2018 season were a map of Italy for "Napoli Milionaria," a bottle and glass to represent the bourbon consumed in a "Long Day's Journey Into Night," and perhaps the easiest to discern, a pair of legs in high heels that could only be "The Rocky Horror Picture Show."

One of the shows for the 2019 season is "Little Shop of Horrors." Now that could pose a challenge for Jacobsen. Will we see the image of Audrey II, the human-eating plant, or an actual specimen?

The carpet bed requires more than 2,000 plants, mostly different coloured varieties of alternanthera with bands of ageratum and borders of alyssum. Planting it in spring is a tedious process, but it doesn't end there. Throughout the season, every two weeks, the plants are hand trimmed by Jacobsen to maintain the precision of the images. Sadly, when the first frost arrives in fall, the plants die and the images fade, as do those in the other gardens at Stratford Festival Theatre.



The largest garden is the Arthur Meighen Garden, a delight for theatre visitors and botanists alike.

For Jacobsen, the work doesn't end. She's as busy as ever, planting and replanting, keeping the gardens tidy until winter snow hides them. She reviews what worked and what didn't in her continuing quest to get everything perfect, despite the vagaries of

plants and weather. "It worries me when things don't look the way I want them to. It motivates me to get it right."

Ask any one of those 1,500 visitors if she did and I'm sure the answer would be, "She sure has." 

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